



MILIND GUNAJI

on the plateau. In Ratnabai's cave is the source of the Pravra river, and a great spot to camp at for its rugged, yet breathtakingly beautiful environs. Catch your breath with a grand view of the Konkan and the surrounding peaks. To the south is the imposing Ajoba Mountain while to the north is the mountain range from Kulang to Kalsubai. If you leave Bhandardara in the early hours of the morning it is possible to visit both the Ratangad fort and the Ratanwadi temple before returning for the night.

Bhandardara is 180 kilometres from Mumbai via Igatpuri and Ghoti. There is a regular bus service from Igatpuri and Ghoti. The MTDC guesthouse at Bhandardara is built at a perfect spot and offers an excellent view of the lake. Bookings can be done in Mumbai and should be done at least a week in advance. There is also a Hotel Roopmanohar just behind the MTDC guesthouse. To really enjoy a holiday here you need at least four to five days.

High on life

In the mountain ranges between Mumbai and Karjat, that is between the Hajimalang range and Matheran, are several small, beautiful, but unknown lakes. The Bhoj lake is situated against the backdrop of the Badlapur hill, the Navranavri hill and the Chanderi and Mhaismal peaks. Few people are aware that such a delightful picnic spot exists only 74 kilometres from Mumbai.

Six kilometres after the turn at Sheel Phata (junction) is the MIDC pipeline road which takes you to Badlapur. The road from Badlapur station also joins this road. Another three kilometres ahead is the Jyuweli village. Two kilometres later take a right turn at Dahivali village. This road takes you straight to the Bhoj dam and the lake. Neat steps climb up the wall to look upon the breathtaking scene of water garlanded by green trees and imposing hills in the background.

A further four kilometres down the same road, is another wonderful spot — Kundeshwar lake — which can be reached by crossing a tiny ghat road after Bhoj lake. Actually Kundeshwar is at the northernmost tip of the Bhoj lake. Clamber down a short distance from where the road ends, edge past a small waterfall and you stumble upon this glorious spot.

The water from Badlapur hill and Navranavri hill has formed a deep valley in

which is the ancient temple of Girija Shanker. The whole view is fascinating. At the foot of the mountains is an ancient cave, with waterfalls on either side and dense trees enveloping the area, reminding one of scenes from an African jungle. The temple was probably built in earlier times as an ideal spot for meditation.

The abundant water and several lakes in the area means that our feathered friends are aplenty. Kingfishers, egrets, hornbills, drongo, robins, larks and cuckoos are among those regularly spotted here.

Several people from neighbouring villages converge at the lakes for day picnics and to bathe under the waterfalls. Since it is just an hour-and-a-half away from Mumbai, carry your lunch and make the most of this spot. For the more adventurous, trekking down the many paths in the surrounding forests can be great fun.

Camping gear

Small knife, small compass, torch, water bottle, lighter or matches. First aid: Crocin tablets, pain relief cream, mosquito repellent cream, Stemetyl to control vomiting, antiseptic cream, sport shoes, and preferably long cargo trousers.

You can buy them at Great Outdoors, Prashant Nagar (Wadarwadi), Off Gokhale Road, Behind Malhar Cinema, Navpada, Thane (W) Tel: 542 2072. They provide tents as well.

The top tent countdown



By Milind Gunaji

THE great outdoors. Ask the people who are cooped up in air-conditioned cabins five days a week, looking at the sunlight bouncing off their sun-protection screens and sighing. Sighing over smoke-clogged pores and life. Only because most are deluded stressaholics who assume that since travel is a nightmare within Mumbai, hitting the road to elsewhere is a bad idea. Ask them, and they'll say, "Ho-hum, yeah, the great outdoors."

Believe me. Such a thing does exist. I've been to each one of these places ever so close to Mumbai. Life flourishes in various shades of green out there. Or have we forgotten that already? Weekend camping trips with a group of friends is how you might want to do it. I do it alone, frequently. And I recommend it.

Especially because the last showers have left their dewy green breath a stone's throw away.

Most of these spots have caves or temples for shelter and are about a day away from Mumbai.

An echo away

A little known spot, Kakuli, is just an hour-and-a-half away from Mumbai. To get there,

go via the Sheel Phata on the Thane-Pune highway. Take the road towards Kalyan and then the Badlapur MIDC road. Ten kilometres to the right is a pipeline from which a two-kilometre kuchcha road leads to Kakuli village.

What you get is the Kakuli lake close by, popularly known by villagers as the GP Tank. Plus, you also get the modern amenities of a small bungalow owned by the railways after a walk along the wall of the dam through a dense forest. You can spend a day here with the prior permission of the Thane authorities.

Badlapur hill, reflected in the placid waters of the lake, is close to the Hajimalang range. Lots of birds, especially cranes and parrots, can be seen. The brightly plumed kingfisher swoops down looking for a good catch while larks and bulbuls flutter around. Those who enjoy trekking can climb the nearby hill on which, at a height of 2,500 ft is the Tawli Guha. A path leads up to this cave from the lake. Needless to say, cave camping is quite an adventure — bonfires, meals cooked straight over the fire, the guitar and friends.

A bit of everything

This next spot is a trekker, picnicker and climber's delight. On the road from Mumbai to Nashik and Igatpuri you will notice the

Baleshwar range of mountains to your right. On the Konkan side of this range of mountains is the Ratangad fort. The source of the Pravra river is in a cave on this hill. A dam has been erected across this river near the village of Shendi, and makes for the grand reservoir of Bhandardara located at a height of 2,400 ft.

The hills which encircle Bhandardara have an average height of about 4,500 ft. To the right of the reservoir are the Alang, Kulang, Madan and Kalsubai peaks, while to the left, the peak of Ratangad fort is clearly visible.

The village of Bari is six kilometres from Bhandardara. To climb Kalsubai, the highest peak in Maharashtra, you have to pass through this village. From here, the climb to Kalsubai is about 3,000 ft and can be completed in about three hours. It is possible to take in Kalsubai in a day if you spend the night at Bhandardara. The MTDC guesthouse overlooks the lake, affording a spectacular view of the calm waters.

Experiencing the sunset at Bhandardara is an unforgettable experience. The sun goes down just beyond the Ratangad fort into a gap in the mountain, creating the illusion of a sparkling diamond ring. To watch this beautiful scene all you have to do is take a walk down the Bhandardara-Randha road. A small park has been created

at the foot of the dam wall. After the rainy season, water is let down into the garden like a waterfall under which visitors are allowed to revel.

About 12 kilometres further down from Bhandardara is the spot where the water overflowing from the Bhandardara dam flows into a deep gorge to form the Randha falls, a major tourist attraction. Nestled among the rocks at the top of the waterfall is a temple dedicated to Ghorpadai Devi. The peak of the Chomdev mountain is also visible from the waterfall. There is a good tar road from Bhandardara to Randha and a regular state transport bus service as well.

On the western banks of Bhandardara is the village of Ratanwadi. At the foot of the Ratangad hill is an ancient Shiva temple. Built at a difficult spot, this rock cut temple is nearly 30 to 32 ft high and has excellent carvings. Near the temple is a small pond named Vishnuiti. Villagers from Shendi village used to take a launch from the village of Murshet. Today, there is a jeep road, which takes you straight to the temple. This road is an offshoot of the Bhandardara-Randha road and skirts the entire lake before climbing upward. Taking this road is like visiting another world; although kuchcha, the bumps do not register as you wind through the dense forest, with the mountains on one side and

the lake on the other.

Climbing enthusiasts can reach the Ratangad fort in just two hours from Ratanwadi.

A small iron ladder takes you to the top. A few rungs bring you to the door of the fort and a Ganpati statue. There are several water tanks and scattered ruins of the fort



Clockwise from top: A wooded path off the Bhandardara-Randha road, a scenic waterfall spot at Kundeshwar and the Bhandardara lake with hills in the background at a height of about 4,500 ft